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## \*A COMPOSITION ON RED INK

By ALFRED M. HITCHCOCK

*Hartford Public High School*

Red ink is to our profession as drugs are to the medical profession. We cannot, or think we cannot, get along without it. But these are well-nigh drugless days. The medicine cabinet is smaller than it used to be; the few bottles it still contains are smaller. I do not look to see red-inkless days; yet the time may come, and soon, when shallower ink-bottles will be the mode. I hope such a time will come soon, for this I have noticed: whereas doctors, wisely or unwisely, may administer drops and pills unnumbered without feeling personal discomfort, teachers who administer large quantities of red ink all too frequently grow thin and pale and dim of eye. I would gladly hasten the coming of such a time, and with this laudable purpose in mind I shall jot down all of the ways I can think of in which red-ink economy may be practised. Among these ways will be found nothing novel, certainly nothing revolutionary; my scrip contains but simples long known to the trade.

1. *Call for less written work.* We have been composition-mad for ten years. Never mind what Harvard thinks and does. Methods partially successful in a college may not be appropriate for secondary schools. There is such a thing as over-training. A few furlongs of the right sort of composition may be vastly more effective than as many miles of the humdrum variety.

2. *Call for shorter themes.* I believe firmly in occasional long compositions—six to eight hundred words, say

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coming once or twice a term. They are necessary if we are to teach our pupils how to collect and organize material; how to maintain a logical or dramatic sequence; how to get from the brain more than lies merely on the surface, easily skimmed. But a large amount of necessary training can just as well be carried on through the writing of twenty-minute or half-hour compositions, provided most of these compositions are written leisurely, carefully, not in class-room but at home, where the pupil has opportunity to weigh and consider his words and correct careless mistakes before handing in his work.

3. *Use the wastebasket.* But let the basket stand in front of the desk, not behind it. Don't put written work in it yourself; let the pupils put it in, and promise them that you will not take it out. This applies to written work done in class-room—not to all of it, of course, but to some of it. Pupils are more sensible than we give them credit for being. They can be made to understand that while it is good to have one's work carefully criticised, much can be gained by simply writing as well as one knows how. They can be made to understand that a live teacher is better than a dead one, and that red-ink correcting, if persisted in without respite, kills inch by inch.

4. *Use college binders,* preserving in them all exercises done at home. Let the pupils keep these binders. Why? Because you must insist that before writing composition number two they examine composition number one and see what red-ink suggestions have been made. Otherwise, being but children, they will make the same mistakes over and over, which must be corrected over and over. But the binder method is of great service to the instructor in another way. He, too, before correcting the second composition, turns back to the first, notes his earlier prescriptions, reviews his patient's case, and is thereby enabled to prescribe more wisely a second time. He sees when to mete out encouragement, when to come out boldly with rebuke; he makes his red ink count. I know the objections; there are two of them: first, binders are heavy to carry about; second, compositions are passed around and make their appearance in other class-rooms. But there are light-weight binders, and compositions—half a dozen or a dozen of them do not weigh much. We teachers need exercise; it does us good to fetch and carry. As for dishonesty, there will be more or less of it under any system; there is very little of it under

some teachers no matter what the system. This I believe to be true regardless of systems; the teacher who never trusts his pupils is a rapid breeder of dishonesty. Pupils behave just about as well as they think you think they are going to behave.

5. *Choose sensible subjects.* I cannot write acceptably about that concerning which I know little or have little interest. As I look back over years of service as a teacher of composition, it seems to me that of all my blunders the blackest have to do with assigning topics out of the pupils' range of interest or comprehension. Of course youngsters will flounder; of course they will twist sentences and make grotesque paragraphs, and call for gallons of red ink if they are continually beyond their depth. How can one find what subjects are acceptable? Ask the pupils, or let them choose one from among several topics that you hope may interest them. Keep strict account from year to year of your failures and your successes. Make as careful a study of boys and girls as you have made of Shakespeare and Milton.

6. *Make your tasks definite.* "I didn't understand what you wanted" is a very common excuse in my classes, and usually it is an honest one. Children are but children; they misunderstand very easily, and, misunderstanding, what a mess they sometimes make of things—handing in three pages when you wanted but one, or one when you wanted three, an imaginary adventure when you craved personal experience, etc., etc. If I live to be ninety, I shall continue to fail to make my assignments understood, and each failure will call for red ink.

7. *Anticipate errors.* Anyone who has taught five years with his eyes open knows what are the common errors. He can rattle off twenty of them without taking breath. He knows what words are commonly misspelled. It is neither easy nor pleasant to invent exercises to correct these errors; but that is the sensible, the economical thing to do. Drill, drill, drill, orally when possible; go over these common errors time and time again. Use the blackboard freely to point out mistakes in spelling and punctuation and diction and construction. Anticipate—head off! Otherwise, what a lot of red ink it does take. I estimate that I save an hour or two every fall, when the seniors begin reading Macaulay, by directing attention, as if I were a showman exhibiting a wonder, to the remarkable way in which Macaulay spells his



name—not *Mc*, nor *ly*, nor *ley*, nor *ie*, nor any combination of these, but *M-a-c-a-u-l-a-y*.

8. *Teach theme-organization through co-operation.* That is, have the class as a whole plan out composition after composition co-operatively, the teacher standing at the board and jotting down topics—heads and sub-heads—as they are suggested by this pupil and that. Let them see a plan grow before their eyes. It is a sovereign remedy for *the sprawls*, a common malady; and the class, you will note, does all the work.

9. *Decline to correct careless work.* Not in anger, of course, but with politeness, assuming that the pupil has misunderstood or has not fully realized what was expected, or—what you please. You simply take for granted, having read a paragraph or two, that the pupil prefers to re-write and you graciously grant the privilege. The pupil will understand—and perhaps will explain that company came unexpectedly the night before; or that Wednesday is his hard day anyhow and he has to let something slip by; or that after writing one composition which did not suit he tore it up and hurriedly wrote a second not as good as the first; or perhaps it was merely a case of toothache. The golden rule is so short that it just reaches round a small red-ink bottle.

10. *As often as you receive a praiseworthy theme, tack it up somewhere; don't conceal it.* Or, better still, read it to the class, call attention to the good things, and confess that you wish you had written it yourself. Honest praise is the best of all tonics; the other kind of praise is worth just about as much as other quack remedies.

11. *Don't be a ferret.* Overlook many errors. Take it for granted that some blunders are but the marks of youthfulness; let them alone and they will disappear in due time. And don't try to make a purse out of a whistle. Some young people haven't much to say and never will have. If a boy has a commonplace mind—or worse, he ought to produce commonplace themes—or worse; and if he has expressed himself within ten per cent of his maximum of intelligence I am not sure but he should receive a mark of ninety even though his compositions, on an absolute scale, merit but twenty or thirty. This rule does not hold in mathematics, nor in Latin, nor in the teaching of literature, perhaps; I believe it does hold in the teaching of composition, where the instructor's sole duty is to so train the pupil

that he will be able to express himself, regardless of whether that self be a Milton or a mollusk.

12. *Give a personal conference whenever it is possible.* It would be well if all correction could be made in this natural way. But in large schools it is usually impossible to get a pupil when you want him. Other studies have their claim, and inter-departmental courtesy is a beautiful thing. For the most part, we must teach by correspondence. Yet there are pupils who can be reached in no other way than by conference. Then take ten minutes at recess time or after school. It may save half a bottle of ink, but I look upon it as a mild form of stealing. Recess time belongs to the pupil; and when school is dismissed, it should be dismissed. Ten minutes before school is better. But if need be, why not call a pupil to the desk during his recitation period, while his mates are busily writing? Or pass up and down the aisles as the pupils are composing, pausing by the side of this one or that who needs attention. The best time to correct an error is the moment it is made.

Twelve is a good number to stop with, and stop I will, regardless of the promise recorded in an earlier paragraph to jot down all the ink-saving devices I could think of; for I seem to hear from many quarters, *All these things have I kept from my youth up.* Yet let me add just one more suggestion: Never have I had explained to me in a satisfactory manner why each recitation in junior and senior Latin and French and German should not begin with a five-minute—or three-minute—written exercise in translation, the exercise to be corrected from the standpoint of English—*English* English; nor why many recitations in history and physics and chemistry should not begin with the writing out of answers to questions on the lesson for the day, these answers to be corrected from the standpoint of English; nor why it is not excellent drill to have the demonstrations of propositions in geometry occasionally written out in plain English, free from symbols and properly punctuated. *One way to avoid using too much red ink is to let someone else use it!* If this plan of distributing the burden is not acceptable, if the load must be borne by one department alone—an unpedagogical, stupid, ineffectual, cruel method—I very much doubt whether the twelve devices mentioned, or twelve times twelve devices, twelve times as shrewd, will ever win for us the battle we are waging against careless, shiftless expression.

## EDITORIAL NOTES

Mr. Hitchcock's "Composition on Red Ink," first issued in February, 1912, has been out of print since 1915. We send it out again in this LEAFLET to the members of the Association because it contains, in our judgment, more sound advice and practical help to the teacher of composition than any article that Mr. Hitchcock has ever written,—and that is saying a great deal.

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The National Council of English Teachers will hold its fall meetings next autumn in Boston on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday preceding Thanksgiving. The Executive Committee of our Association has voted to transfer our December meeting to one of these days, and to co-operate in every possible way to make this first visit of the National Council to New England a noteworthy occasion. We shall devote the October LEAFLET next fall to the details of this convention.

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In the June LEAFLET there will be an article and a page of notes upon the teaching of news-writing for a weekly school-paper,—a subject which in the Middle West is just now being greatly discussed. The interest, moreover, seems to be spreading into New England. With the LEAFLET will go a sample copy of a weekly newspaper issued by the pupils of a high school in eastern Massachusetts.

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Members who have not paid their dues since March, 1917, are, with this issue, dropped from our mailing list. More than 100 members have not paid their 1919 dues! Our treasurer is Mr. A. B. DeMille, Milton Academy, Milton, Mass.



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